DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 700 CS 212 998

AUTHOR Harred, Jane
TITLE Collaborative Learning in the Literature Classroom: Old Problems Revisited.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; *Educational Objectives; Higher Education; Literature Appreciation; Power Structure; *Student Attitudes; Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Learning

ABSTRACT

Some intended goals of collaborative learning are to disrupt established power relationships and to understand texts through a collaborative process of consensus and dissent. In practice, however, it is difficult to reach these goals, and students are expressing dissatisfaction with collaborative work in the classroom. A common complaint is that the students don't hear enough from the teacher in the classroom. Although the goal of the collaborative pedagogy is to empower the students, it is unclear whether students can be empowered if they do not feel empowered--when they feel, instead, actively excluded from a community of knowledge that they want to enter. Another concern is the collaborative model's emphasis on synthesis, on resolution, on consensus, and on summary, because these emphases can be totalizing and coercive, silencing minority opinions. The fact that those students who are most forceful and articulate in advancing their arguments are generally those who control what ends up counting as knowledge, negates the goal of de-emphasizing competition in the classroom. In spite of these concerns, a professor can use his or her authority in the classroom to authorize an opposing position. In this way minority views can be expressed and taken seriously. (PRA)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED335700

Jane Harred
University of Minnesota

# Collaborative Learning in the Literature Classroom: Old Problems Revisited

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jane Harred

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS212978

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Jane Harred
University of Minnesota

# Collaborative Learning in the Literature Classroom: Old Problems Revisited

I've been thinking lately about some of the frustrations with collaborative learning expressed by students in the literature classes I've taught at the University of Minnesota, and about how those frustrations might help illuminate my own. Like many of you, no doubt, I ask my students to collaborate in a variety of ways: they discuss a work in groups and report on their discussion to the entire class, which then as a whole discusses the work of the groups and, with help from me, places their work in the context of the work of the larger knowledge communities of readers, literary critics, biographers, etc. Groups also research topics or specific works and teach them to the class, later serving as consultants on these topics to students who choose to write papers about them. They discuss and debate the merits of various approaches they might take as writers about texts. And so on. I begin by hoping that a collaboratively-based pedagogy will disrupt established power relationships. I wish to encourage students to elaborate upon what they already know; to challenge the academic system of meritocracy; to see literature as a socially constructed category and knowledge about it as socially constructed, as well; to understand texts through a collaborative process of consensus and

CS212978

dissent. But I haven't been entirely successful in meeting these goals, and my students, too, have been expressing some dissastisfaction with collaborative work in the classroom.

One of the comments they make frequently on course evaluations or during conversations with me is that they don't hear enough from me during the class. I imagine that this is a familiar complaint. Whatever the source of this impression (and there are probably a number that we can discuss) it is a real problem, because the students believe that I am actively--not maliciously, but certainly by design, through my pedagogy--withholding my knowledge and expertise from them. We wish to empower students by using a collaborative pedagogy, but I question whether students can *be* empowered when they don't *feel* empowered, when they feel, instead, actively excluded from a community of knowledge that some of them want to enter, even if only temporarily.

The thing is, students recognize that they are not part of the club, the professional community of literary-critical knowledge; and they do not believe that they will get to be members by talking to other students. "Knowledgeable peers" are an important ingredient in discourse or interpretive or knowledge communities, but students see neither themselves nor their fellow students as knowledgeable. Although, as Kenneth Bruffee points out in his discussion of precisely this problem, students do bring all kinds of knowledge into class with them, and although they know more than they think they do (644), their sense of

themselves as non-members of the discourse community of professional readers and critics is, after all, accurate. The notion of knowledge as a fluid entity constructed socially through a freewheeling, never-ending give and take in discourse communities tends to overlook the existence of boundaries between discourse communities, the criteria used to judge whether one is a member of such communities, and the process by which one becomes a member. Students are aware, though, that these boundaries and criteria probably exist. Though the collaborative process provides them with a way to build a community of their own, they see it as a community with little real authority or prestige, even if it is built with the help of an authority figure, the instructor.

I worry, then, that I am in fact withholding valuable information about what members of the discourse communities I represent do. My worry is compounded by my suspicion that, although I'd hoped a collaborative pedagogy would be democratic and open, it is, instead, sometimes authoritarian, competetive, and coercive. My own authority is somewhat effaced by the pedagogy, but, as my students recognize, I still have it: after all, I evaluate them. Effacing my authority in the classroom and then re-asserting it by giving grades seems to them at best puzzling, at worst dishonest. In a collaborative classroom the teacher plays all kinds of directive roles: designing questions and tasks for the students; acting as group facilitator, monitor, synthesizer, representative of professional discourse

communities; and evaluating. I question, then, whether such a classroom is substantially less teacher-centered than a traditional classroom. In fact, because I participate in some of the group activities and monitor what goes on in them, and because during these activities much more of my students' selves is made public than would be the case in a traditional, lecture-oriented class, I monitor, evaluate, have some authority over, larger portions of my students' selves than I would if they were listening to me lecture.

The collaborative model's emphasis on synthesis, on resolution, on consensus, and on summary worries me as well, because I think these emphases can be totalizing and coercive. The need for a group to come to enough of a consensus to be able to summarize its activity or teach a text in a coherent way to the rest of the class tends to silence minority opinions; controversy is edited out, and much of what is interesting and valuable about collaboration--indeed, the process itself--is often erased. The views urged by the majority tend to be highlighted in summaries and syntheses. Given the assumptions about democracy and the important role of the majority in it that our students bring with them to their groups, it is difficult to counterbalance the authority granted the majority. In addition, the drive toward unity and reconciliation in the classroom seems at odds with some of the contemporary literary-critical practices we would have our students engage in.

Generally, those students who are most forceful, vigorous, and articulate in advancing their arguments are those who have the most control over what sort of consensus develops in a group, what ends up counting as knowledge. While this is hardly surprising, it suggests the competititive nature of the process of constructing knowledge socially. And while this competition may be precisely what goes on in professional knowledge communities and may be part of what we hope to prepare our students to engage in, the collaborative classroom is not merely a knowledge community; it is a classroom, one of whose goals is to de-emphasize competition between students. Furthermore, it is usually the students who come into the classroom from non-privileged circumstances who do worst in this sort of competition. One of my students who was most frustrated with collaborative learning was a blue-collar worker who had come to college in his mid-forties after a job-related injury disabled him. He had great difficulty communicating with the members of his group; he said he didn't see the point of talking so much and couldn't understand the process that he was supposed to use to collaborate with others on responses to the texts. His group members' facility in doing so with no more instruction than he received humiliated, alienated, and baffled him. He was both frightened and resentful of being expected to take on the authority of teaching something to the class. Contrary to my intentions, my collaborative classroom didn't make academic success any easier or more possible for him.

In spite of my emphasis here on whether collaborative learning can empower students and de-center authority, I do believe that I can put my authority in the classroom to good use. I can, for example, use it to authorize an opposition. My students tend not to be a very culturally diverse crowd. Perhaps as a result of that, and probably also as a result of the larger culture's devaluation of left-wing ideologies, my students' range of responses to texts and issues tends to be relatively narrow and generally conservative. Because I believe that it is important not only for minority views to be expressed but for such views to be taken seriously, I think it is useful to support such views with whatever authority I have. In that way, those views can become a real part of the process of negotiating what counts as knowledge.

Cited

Bruffee, Kenneth. "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *College English* 46 (1984): 635-652.